

# WHAT IS JAINISM?

**JAINISM** is a science, and not a code of arbitrary rules and capricious commandments. It does not claim to derive its authority from any non-human source, but is, science-like, founded on the knowledge of those Great Ones who have attained perfection with its aid. Scientific validity can be claimed neither by dogmatism nor mysticism; and it is unnecessary to add that nothing but science or scientific thought can be relied upon to produce immediate, certain and unvarying results.

To understand Jainism, it is first of all necessary to understand the nature of Religion which people vaguely talk about, and which is still more vaguely preached to them from the pulpits of the numerous creeds which are flourishing in our midst in this age.

Briefly put, Religion is the path of liberation from the suffering and pain which is the lot of beings in *saṃsāra* (transmigration). All living beings—men, animals, and the like—only seek happiness in all things and pursuits; there is no one who does not hanker after eternal life and blissfulness in some form or other. Religion claims to be the science which enables the soul to realize the immortality and bliss for which it is hankering. Most of the religions of the world, however, have only dogma and myth to offer, in place of the scientific thought, which alone can satisfy the demands of reason, and from which alone can flow the desired good, under all circumstances. Jainism differs from all other religions, in so far as it is a perfectly accurate, definite and exact science, free from misty and mystic ritual, unholy superstition and fear-engendering

devotion. It does not ask its devotee to accept its teaching on the authority of anything other than Reason, and invites all to understand the nature of the subject before pinning their faith on it.

To begin with, Jainism explains the nature of happiness which all are athirst for. It is obvious that the sensual pleasures do not satisfy the soul, however much they might tickle the senses for the time being. Sensual pleasure is essentially impermanent, depends on the contact with other things and bodies, involves trouble and pain in its obtainment, creates worry and uneasiness after its experience, leads to strife with those who happen to be engaged in the pursuit of the same object, and gives rise to misery in old age and on the impairment of the senses on which alone its enjoyment depends. No one who has analysed his ideas can possibly find anything in common between the ideal of happiness which he seeks and the sensual gratification described above. What one really wants is the happiness which the Gods enjoy—undying, unabating, soul-enrapturing happiness—not the temporary gratification of lust, but the exhilarating rhythm of ecstasy, delight or bliss, whatever it might be called.

This ecstatic delight which is neither evanescent nor the source of sorrow and pain, like the gratification of sensual lust, is really the nature of the soul, though through ignorance it is unaware of the fact. The proof of this is to be found in the fact that the pleasure one experiences on the successful performance of some task comes from within and is independent of the senses. Analysis reveals the fact that the essence of this kind of happiness lies in the notion of freedom, so that whenever the soul is freed from some irksome duty, obligation

or restraint— and all kinds of activities except the unrestrained 'pulsation' of freedom are only the different forms of bondage—its natural delight (from *de*, intense, and *light*, lightness), hence freedom, at once manifests itself. The soul is the rhythm of free activity of the self-conscious force, the living essence or 'will-to-be,' and feels dull and heavy when burdened with external and unnatural tasks and obligations. Hence the removal of its obligations and restraints re-establishes its pure rhythm of intense lightness, that is, freedom, and enables it to enjoy its *svabhāvic ananda* (bliss). It follows from this that when all its obligations and tasks are removed, the soul must necessarily experience the purest kind of delight, which, being *svabhāvic* (pertaining to its own nature), can have no ending.

What prevents the soul from the enjoyment of its natural joy is ignorance. Hardly one man in a thousand has any idea of the nature of pure joy, and all, more or less, try to extract it from their surroundings, which are, by nature, utterly incapable of yielding it. Yet if they will only analyse their feelings, they will not fail to observe that the moments of true happiness are only the moments of true freedom. Ignorance of the natural joy of the soul, then, is the cause which stands between it and happiness. Hence, knowledge is necessarily the road to bliss.

The kind of knowledge which leads to joy is more comprehensive and perfect than that which is imparted in modern schools and colleges. It is the knowledge of the nature of substances and the forces of nature which rob the soul of its rhythm of freedom and of those which re-establish it therein. All other kinds of knowledge may be necessary for the man of the world, but are useless to the soul seeking perfection, i.e., immortality and bliss.

There are seven essential objects of knowledge called *tattvas*.

These are:

1. *jīva*, the living or conscious substance, i.e., the soul;
2. *ajīva*, the non-living, i.e., the unconscious substance;
3. *āsrava*, i.e., inflow of matter into the soul;
4. *bandha*, i.e., bondage;
5. *saṁvara*, or the checking of the inflow, that is, *āsrava*;
6. *nirjarā*, the removal of matter from the soul; and
7. *moksha*, i.e., freedom.

We shall take up each of these seven *tattvas* separately, and shall deal with them briefly.

(1) Soul is the living substance, and is pure consciousness in essence; it is not the product of matter in any sense. It is by nature all-knowing and blissful, and is endowed with untiring, inexhaustible and unending energy. All substances are eternal, and the soul is no exception to the rule. It is *amurtik*, that is, not possessed of sensible qualities; hence it cannot be perceived by the senses, though it is not actually formless, since all things which exist must have some sort of form. Souls have existed contaminated with matter from beginning-lessness, and are consequently unable to enjoy their *svabhāvic* attributes omniscience, bliss and the like. The practicing of the rules of Right Conduct, however, enables one to remove the impurities which obstruct the thrice-blessed qualities of the soul, the four principal ones of which are collectively called the *ananta*

*chatushtaya* (infinity quartette), namely, infinite perception, infinite knowledge, infinite bliss and infinite power.

(2) The non-living substances comprise *pudgala*, that is, matter, time, space, *dharma* and *adharma*. Jainism maintains that no world process, or evolution, is possible in the absence of any one or more of these five non-soul (*ajīva*) substances and spirits (souls). Space is necessary for localisation, time for continuity and succession, *dharma* and *adharma* for motion and rest respectively, matter for supplying the material of bodies, and souls for life, knowledge and enjoyment. These six substances and their nature have been fully dealt with by Jaina philosophers, and, therefore, it is not necessary to explain them at length here.

(3) The third *tattva* is *āsrava*, which signifies the influx of karmic matter into the soul. In consequence of its activities, the soul attracts to itself particles of matter which under the influence of its passions combine with it, thereby crippling its natural functions and constituting its bondage. Jainism maintains that the soul is eternal, and has been undergoing transmigration during the entire beginning-less eternity of the past, on account of the karmic forces with which it is enmeshed. The *karmic bandhas* (bonds of *karmas*) are forged by the fusion of spirit and matter, and rob the soul of its natural perfection and freedom. A 'fettered' soul, thus, resembles a bird whose wings have been sewn up to prevent its flying away. The soul free by nature, like the bird, but, owing to the association of matter, feels as if its wings had been cut, and cannot enjoy its natural freedom and joy.

(4) *Bandha* is the state of bondage of the soul as already explained. There are many kinds of bonds which have to be broken before *nirvana* can be attained.

(5) The next *tattva* is *samvara*, the process of checking the influx of *karmic* matter into the 'constitution' of the soul. Obviously, freedom cannot be had so long as the bondage of the soul is not terminated by the removal of the particles of matter of which its *karmic* bonds are forged. The first step towards this end is the checking of the further influx of matter which ceaselessly flows into the constitution of the soul.

(6) The inflow of fresh matter being checked, the next step is to remove the bonds one by one. This is called *nirjarā*. When all the bonds are broken asunder, and the soul is freed from all its crippling relations with matter, it enjoys its natural freedom and bliss and omniscience.

(7) The seventh and the last *tattva* is naturally the ideal of perfection, that is, freedom, immortality and bliss, which the soul attains to on freeing itself from all its bonds.

Such is the nature of the essential principles or *tattvas*. To recapitulate briefly, Jainism maintains that all living beings in the universe are conscious entities possessed of fullness and perfection and capable of manifesting them by self-exertion in the right direction. Their natural perfection, which includes immortality, omniscience, infinite energy and infinite bliss, is marred by the operation of their own *karmas*, that is, of the different kinds of forces engendered in the soul in conjunction with matter by its own actions. Hence, all that the soul has to do is to check the further influx of *karmic* matter, and to destroy its bonds. The moment this can be done its *svabhāvic* perfection will be attained, and freedom, immortality and bliss

enjoyed. There is no question of begging or bargaining with anyone in this system, and it is noteworthy that it is absolutely impossible for any outside agency to confer either the immortality, the bliss, or the perfection which the soul is hankering after, and ceaselessly tries to obtain from its surroundings. The whole thing is a question of the law of causes and effects.

Jainism does not, for the foregoing reason, offer devotion to any being or beings in the hope of obtaining bliss, immortality or perfection from them. These are already the natural properties of the soul, and cannot possibly be had from outside. Hence Jainism does not recognise the God of popular theology, but urges the aspirant soul to worship the feet of the Perfected *Siddhas* in the same way as one would show reverence to a teacher. The greatest Teacher is certainly entitled to the greatest amount of reverence, and no teacher can certainly be greater than the Omniscient *Tirthankaras* who not only knew all things, but the perfection of whose knowledge is also fully demonstrated by the fact that it enabled Them to attain the fullest degree of perfection.

Such is the main teaching of Jainism, and it is obvious that it has nothing in common with any of those systems of religion which engender or encourage superstition. The path to *nirvana*, according to Jainism, consists in Right Belief, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct.

On its practical side, Jainism is fully calculated to enable everyone however lowly, or vicious, to attain to the highest Ideal. It at once converts a vicious doer of evil into a respected citizen; changes the latter into a Saint, and later transforms the Saint himself into a God! In the daily duties of a Jaina layman



stress is laid on self-denial, study and the giving of suitable gifts of food, medicine, education, and protection to the persecuted. The Saint cultivates active love for all living beings, and controls his activities in all respects, that is, mental, physical and vocal, to avoid causing harm to anyone including even small insects and the lowly ant.

It only remains to consider the influence of Jainism on civilization. Some people seem to possess what may be described as an unholy dread of religion on the ground that it would be destructive of civilization. This fear is, however, quite unfounded, and confined to those who have no idea of the great Ideal of the soul, and whose conception of being does not embrace the life beyond the grave. Let us not confound civilization with sensualism, refined or gross. The true significance of civilization means nothing if not the culture of the soul, on lines which are compatible with its steady progress both here and in the life or lives after death. Sensualism, however much it might be refined, is only calculated to destroy the finer instincts of the soul, making it negative, and consequently foredooming it to the torments of hell and future undesirable incarnations, as brutes and beasts. The ancients were by no means deficient in the knowledge of things and sciences which have contributed towards the building up of what we boast of as our modern civilization, but they also knew that the things which appeal to the senses only lead to the degeneration of the soul, and wisely refrained from cultivating, beyond certain useful limits, the arts and sciences which tend to fatten the body at the cost of the spiritual nourishment of the soul. The one most marked feature of distinction between man and animal is the thinking capacity, which the former is endowed with and may develop to perfection and from which



the latter is largely debarred. Hence, while an animal has little or no chance of bettering its condition in its present form, man may and ought to avail himself of the opportunity, if he would avoid pain and suffering here and hereafter. The civilization which enables him to do so speedily is the only form of culture of which Reason can approve, not the civilization which invites him to the fold of sensualism, but another, though less repulsive, name for animalism. The one most prominent feature of the modern civilization is the cost of living which is going up from day to day and which entails the devotion of whole-time labour for the procuring of the means of livelihood and those other things which are necessary to enable one to be counted as a "somebody" in society. This leaves no time for spiritual unfoldment, which itself demands the withdrawal of the outgoing energy and its inner concentration for the destruction of the *karmic* bonds.

The civilization of the ancients, on the contrary, never lost sight of the necessity for the spiritual evolution of the soul, and made the cost of living so cheap that everyone could procure the necessities of life without much trouble or labour, utilising every moment of valuable time for devotion to God, i.e., the Ideal of Perfection and Bliss.

Jainism prescribes two kinds of rules of conduct for the souls which aspire to attain salvation, those becoming a *muni* (an ascetic) and those suitable for the *śrāvaka*, the householder. The former's rigidity is well calculated to lead to emancipation in the course of one earth-life, but the latter are meant for the guidance of the souls not sufficiently advanced to undertake the arduous and austere vows of the *muni*. Hence the effect of the influence of Jainism on modern civilization does not mean the

destruction of its useful institutions at all, but only the elimination of such of them as actually play havoc with the spiritual aspirations of the soul and lead it to undesirable regions and unhappy incarnations in the future.

In conclusion, the reader is invited to study the teaching of Jainism in a scientific way, and if he will only bear in mind the nature of the great Ideal of the soul, he will not be long in discovering for himself that Jainism is the science of liberation par excellence.

Excerpted from- WHAT IS JAINISM (Essays and Addresses — 1) by Late Shri Champat Rai Jain